

Americans and media: bittersweet romance

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The American public, like Thomas Jefferson, cherishes the press — but also detests it.

What's behind this love-hate relationship?

The largest study ever conducted of American attitudes toward the media has just been completed by the Gallup Organization for the Times Mirror Company, a media conglomerate. Gallup tried to fathom Americans' ambivalent attitudes toward the media.

The pollsters found that, even though many people have criticisms, they are generally willing to overlook flaws because the watchdog role of the press is so crucial. Mistakes, biases, and other shortcomings are tolerated.

In addition the public enjoys the news much the way it enjoys entertainment. And the popularity of well-known news figures such as Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings bolsters the image of the entire news industry.

Some of the findings were unexpected.

The study found, for example, that while Americans greatly value a free press, a majority of them doubt that the US media are really free.

The public told Gallup that TV, newspapers, magazines, and other sources of information are "often influenced by the powerful," including big government, big labor, big business, and other special-interest groups. At the same time, some re-

cent charges against the media appear to be largely unfounded.

Critics have claimed, for example, that the media have a serious credibility gap with the public. But the study found this was not the case. About 9 out of 10 Americans give the media high marks for "believability."

"Not only is the press perceived as believable, it is also perceived as likable," the study found. "Clear majorities express positive feeling for major news organizations and famous newsmen. . . ."

"Eighty-eight percent express favorable opinions about their own newspaper; 89 percent express favorable opinions about local TV news, the same percentage for network TV news. . . . All major news organizations were more favorably regarded than President Reagan," the study found.

This "favorable" opinion, however, is generally lukewarm. The public gives the media a grade of "B" rather than "A" for its performance.

Major criticisms appear to be that the press is "too negative" and invades people's privacy (a microphone thrust toward the face of a bereaved person, for example).

Also, a majority believe the press too often tends to "favor one side" in its coverage of issues. A plurality suggests there is often political bias. Most important, the study found, the public sees the press as dependent on and "often influenced by the powerful."

Michael J. Robinson, a George Washington University professor who helped design the study, says many Americans think the press is "afraid of the CIA" and other powerful organizations. For that reason, the public believes, the press isn't as tough as it should be.

Three-quarters of all Americans think the "federal government influences the way the press reports news" and nearly as many think advertisers do, as well.

In part, this is because the public believes the press is run "too much as a business," Dr. Robinson says. If the press gets too pushy, it will lose advertisers, lose government sources, or even lose subscribers.

Press independence is crucial because the public puts a high value on the "watchdog" role of the media.

The public thinks, like President Jefferson did, that it is the primary job of the press to keep government officials in line — to bark loudly when it spots scandal, malfeasance, or other breaches of public trust.